

# Arizona budget cuts education, health care for the poor

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The state legislature in Arizona has taken an axe to education funding and vital social programs, cutting \$1.1 billion in spending. The cuts are part of an effort to fill the \$2.6 billion fiscal year 2011 budget deficit. These cuts will have disastrous consequences for hundreds of thousands of poor and working class residents of Arizona almost immediately.

The budget plan puts an end to KidsCare, a children's healthcare program that provides services to 47,000 low-income children throughout the state. Additionally, \$385 million has been cut from the state Medicaid program, forcing 310,000 adults to be removed from state health coverage next January.

With the new budget plan, most state employees will have their wages cut by 5 percent. These new wage cuts will come partly through unpaid furlough days.

Public education in Arizona has also been put on the chopping block, with hundreds of millions in cuts to K-12 as well as higher education. \$218 million has been slashed from kindergarten funding, causing schools to revert to half-days for kindergartners. Over the past two years, more than \$100 million has been cut from higher education, forcing steep rises in tuition and fees.

A preliminary plan to force tuition hikes at the three state universities was adopted on the same days as the budget by the Arizona Board of Regents.

At Arizona State University, new students will see tuition and fees jump by 18.8 percent, or \$1,288. At the University of Arizona, all undergraduates will face an increase of 20.4 percent, or \$1,403. And new students at Northern Arizona University will have an increase of 15.7 percent, or \$1,040.

On top of these across-the-board cuts, students in particular majors and programs will be required to pay additional "differential" tuition and fees. For example,

fees for architecture students at the University of Arizona will be increased by \$150 to \$900.

Many of these cuts contained in the budget will likely be deepened over the year. Legislators drafted the budget taking for granted that voters of Arizona will approve three cost cutting or revenue raising initiatives on ballots this year.

The first of which will be the proposed 1 percent sales tax increase supported by Republican Governor Jan Brewer that will appear on the May 18 ballot. Brewer stated, "We are so far in the hole...that if we want any kind of quality life and to assure our future, there is absolutely no other way" than passing the sales tax increase. The increase is meant to be only temporary, expiring at the end of May 2013 and is expected to raise \$1 billion in revenue, two thirds of which would be for education, while the remaining third would fund public safety, health care and human services.

Should the sales tax increase be rejected, the state will implement additional cuts of \$867 million, primarily on education. Legislators estimate over \$100 million in cuts to higher education would result, forcing the regents to look for another tuition increase as well as additional cuts to employee salaries, funding for research programs and financial aid.

K-12 education would receive the bulk of the remainder of the cuts, threatening the devastation of the Arizona public education system, which already ranks near the bottom in per-pupil funding for all states. By some estimates, 15-20 percent of all teaching positions could be eliminated if the sales tax increase does not pass.

Another program being put to the vote on the November ballot is the First Things First program for children, which was approved by voters in 2006. First

Things First focuses on early healthcare and education in children ages 1-5. Voters will be forced to choose between completely eliminating the First Things First program by redirecting the approximately \$325 million in tobacco tax revenue that is collected for this purpose into the general fund, or ultimately facing cuts to other vital services.

The third program that could be cut is the Growing Smart land conservation project. If voters vote to eliminate the funding, the program would remain in existence, however without any funding.

The effects of these devastating cuts will be multiplied by the fact that Arizona's housing market has been in crisis for some time, with no sign of improvement, and unemployment is rising. Housing prices in the Phoenix metro area have dropped by 50 percent or more, and in many cases homeowners are choosing to walk away from their homes rather than pay mortgages that equal much more than their home is worth. The official unemployment rate in Arizona stands at 9.7 percent, while many public sector workers have had their hours reduced and many state jobs have been eliminated due to the fiscal crisis.

One thing is clear from the legislators' approach to the budget, they, like the Obama Administration and the legislators in Washington, are intent on making the poor and working class pay for the current economic crisis. Many express a similar attitude to that of state Republican House Speaker Kirk Adams, who acknowledged that the cuts were difficult, but necessary; or Governor Brewer, who proclaims about the proposed sales tax increase that there is "no other way."

Democrats, who in large part voted against the cuts out of fear of a popular backlash, didn't oppose the cuts per se but only the manner in which they were carried out. Democrats would rather have seen funding slashed from these programs without their outright elimination. When it comes down to it, however, the defunding of public education and health care amounts to the deliberate crippling of these fundamental social programs.

Working people in Arizona are being held hostage by the legislators; they are being forced to choose which programs are to be cut—many of which will be cut eventually anyhow—and forced to choose between regressive taxes or the elimination of vital services.

Working people should reject the entire premise of the budget discussion.

Workers and students across the nation protested tuition hikes and cuts to education on March 4, many with the understanding that these attacks on education are only a part of the broader attack on the living standards and well-being of working people everywhere. The financial elite, through the Obama Administration and the legislatures of every state, are intent on making the working class pay to ensure that profits stay private and losses are absorbed by all.

The fight against the attacks on working people in Arizona cannot be waged on the terms of the state legislature, who speak with one voice about the need for "fiscal responsibility" and the need to cut spending. What they mean is that the working class needs to be held responsible, and that programs that benefit them must be cut, while the financial elite must be free from responsibility and free to profit.



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